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COMMUNICATION WITH THE SOVIET MUSLIM WORLD

Findings and Implications

Summary and Implications

On Saturday, January 19, a USICA-sponsored workshop brought together a number of Government and academic experts to discuss the Soviet Muslim world.

The principal substantive conclusion to emerge from the discussion is that the appropriate context for viewing (and thus communicating with) Soviet Muslims is that of a traditional Muslim culture attempting to cope with the forces of modernization and not one primarily motivated by traditional religious concerns.

Within this context, it appears that Islam serves as a cultural tradition and rallying point against outsiders. There is evidence that Soviet Muslim elites accept the benefits of modernity and the concept of socialism, but resent the dominance of Russians or other European outsiders.

Soviet Muslims appear to have a higher standard of living than their brethren to the south and do not seem to have shared their recent religious stirrings. While there is little evidence to suggest that Soviet aggressive behavior in Afghanistan is related to immediate concerns over cross-border infection, Moscow's leaders are clearly troubled by the long-term political/security, economic and social implications of the increasing number of Muslim citizens resulting from strikingly differentiated birth rates between Muslims and Slavs.

Possible policy implications for USICA are the following:

- programming which concentrates primarily on religious themes will not be very effective;
- appropriate programming should include our recognition and appreciation of the culture, values and contributions of the various Muslim groups in the Soviet Union;
- in the foreseeable future the primary means of communication with this area will be through VOA and academic exchanges;

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- we know little about the listening habits of the peoples of this area, although some modest information can be obtained;
- available information indicates that Muslims in the region listen to the broadcasts of Turkey, Egypt and other Islamic countries, suggesting that cooperative ventures in broadcasting and information exchange with friends and allies neighboring on Soviet Central Asia are worth exploring;
- there is concern about the scarcity of available professional talent who understand the area and read the languages, suggesting that funding the IREX Preparatory Fellowship Program (ECA is prepared to submit this proposal once again to the Board for Foreign Scholarships) might be a modest but valuable contribution;
- particularly given the dynamic situation in the region, there is a continuing need to maintain a dialogue between the Agency and the specialists in the area. This can be accomplished through facilitating individual contacts, additional short-term workshops, and/or conferences similar to our earlier Soviet Central Asia and Caucasus conferences;
- when the exhibits program is resumed, priority should be assigned to the choice of sites in Soviet Central Asia, the inclusion of native language exhibit captions, and the recruitment of guides who speak the languages native to the region;
- efforts should be made to expand the monitoring of Soviet Central Asian local language printed media and radio broadcasts, mainly through FBIS, but also by improving language capabilities in other elements of the foreign affairs community;
- we need to know more about the interaction of Soviet Muslims and the Russians who continue to dominate the political and economic life of the country. We should not lose sight of the fact that Soviet Russian elite attitudes and perceptions should remain a major concern of USICA, and in this case particularly Russian attitudes toward Soviet minorities;
- in this context it is important to monitor the rise of Russian nationalism to determine whether it is a movement antagonistic to other minorities or a parallel search for ethnic and national identity which has remained unfulfilled by Soviet state ideology.

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The Workshop

On Saturday, January 19, a USICA-sponsored workshop brought together a number of Government and academic experts on the Muslim areas of Soviet Central Asia in order to discuss the impact on the area of resurgent Islamic fundamentalism, demographic and social developments, ethnicity and nationalism, and the implications of these factors for Southwest Asian countries bordering on the USSR. The primary purpose of the workshop was to inform USICA policy making in programming to the region.

The first fact to be acknowledged in attempting to examine USICA programming in Soviet Muslim areas is that all parts of the U.S. Government suffer from a serious knowledge gap. Very little is known about attitudes or communication patterns in this region, and resources are seriously lacking to remedy this shortcoming.

The World of Soviet Muslims

The Soviet Muslim world is a highly complex mix of ethnic and linguistic groups whose settlement patterns have traditionally been oblivious to man-made political boundaries such as those which divide the Central Asia republics from one another or separate them from the states of Southwest Asia. The peoples of the area have resisted attempts at cultural assimilation for many centuries and have maintained their ethnic and cultural integrity despite the rise and fall of any number of empires administered by outsiders. Just as the ethnic complexity and stubborn resistance to assimilation make it difficult for outsiders, such as Slavs, to govern the area, these same factors complicate attempts by USICA to develop programs which are sufficiently focused to be effective, yet sufficiently broad to be economically and administratively feasible.

The Cross-border Situation

At the same time, the area on both sides of the Soviet border is undergoing dynamic change. On the Soviet side, the continuing population growth in Muslim areas will have a long-term impact in the coming years as these regions will supply more than 100 percent of the net additions to the labor force. While there are no predictions of armed uprisings, Soviet leaders are concerned about the increasing role that Soviet Muslims may ultimately play in the economic and political life of the country.

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There is no evidence that immediate concerns in this area motivated Soviet aggressive behavior in Afghanistan, but the long-term implications continue to trouble Soviet leaders.

Information is at best sketchy, but there is little evidence that Soviet Muslims have shared in the religious stirrings that have been manifest in neighboring Muslim areas. On a material level, Soviet Muslims appear to live at a higher standard than their cross-border brothers and may even be condescending about their situation. Nonetheless, there are indications of sympathy for the plight of their Islamic brethren.

The Role of Islam

The focus of much of the discussion was the role of Islam as a religion, a cultural mode, and/or a weapon in the battle to preserve ethnic identity in the face of official attempts to assimilate and Sovietize the various peoples of Central Asia. While it was agreed that Islam is all three of these, it was the consensus that the religious element itself is not the most important. Soviet statistics and independent observations show that fervent religious feeling is low (perhaps five to ten percent of the Muslim population considers itself highly religious), although it is also the case that a similar proportion of Central Asians claims to be atheistic. For groups between the two extremes, religious forms and beliefs do not appear to be mobilizing influences for action and are adhered to out of habit, family and group pressures, and greater or lesser feelings of belief in the creed.

Much more important than the purely religious aspect of Islam is its impact as a way of life, as a setter of customs, family practice, ethics, and Weltanschauung. Here apparently, Sovietization (which means essentially the destruction of religious beliefs, the breakdown of ethnic and national affiliations, and their replacement by an ethnic and cultural identity shared by Europeans and Asians alike) has been only partly successful. One example cited was of an ostensibly Sovietized Party official of Muslim origin who, when faced with death, suddenly became obsessed with Islamic funeral and burial customs.

Further evidence of the hold of Muslim culture in Central Asia and other areas of the Soviet Union was offered in an attempt to explain why so many Russians or Soviets of European origin hold high positions in Central Asian government and administrative structures. Part of the cause, of course, is Moscow's desire to exert control

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over provincial affairs and a lack of confidence in the complete loyalty of Muslim cadres, but other, more contextual, factors also influence the situation. In the words of one expert, the "Protestant work ethic" has not been accepted by Soviet Muslims and in order to get the work done, Europeans have to be imported. This is not solely a case of natives being supplanted by Europeans, but often is the result of natives simply not wanting the job.

The third role of Islam, that of a weapon against outsiders, is also highly important. Islam serves in part as a rallying concept against Sovietization or, more broadly, against Western influences which would destroy community values. Here again, the religious issue is secondary.

Modernization and Islam

It was suggested that a more fruitful approach to the role of Islam would be to investigate the impact of modernization on traditional Islamic culture. Despite the resilient nature of Islamic culture and the use of Islam to preserve ethnic and cultural identity, the modernizing aspects of Sovietization have met with some success. It is important to note that this success is not a case of modernity overwhelming traditionalism, but one where many of the aspects of modernity (and Sovietization) coexist but do not necessarily compete with traditional Islamic culture.

Just as Islamic culture has been modified for many groups, the Soviet and modern patterns which seek to supplant the traditional modes have been "Islamified" or altered to fit prevailing cultural patterns. There is, moreover, evidence of a willingness by Muslim elites to accept the benefits of modernity and socialism, but to resent the need for Russians and other Europeans to implement the changes and control the society. In this context, it was suggested that increasing modernization may actually intensify resistance to domination by Europeans.

Policy Context

Given the role of the Muslim areas and peoples in the future of the Soviet Union and their strategic location, a re-examination of USICA programming to the area must be undertaken immediately. At present there is little that can be done to expand programs in the area--in part because of the recent Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, but also because the lack of attention paid to the Muslim areas in

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the past two decades has reduced the U.S. ability to launch new programs on short notice. The most that can be done is to enhance those means available to communicate with Soviet Muslims--mainly VOA and the academic exchanges.

Suggestions for improving USICA programming either presently or in the future fell into the two general areas of changes or enhancements in content and in form. With respect to content, it was noted that a considerable impression on Soviet Moslems would be achieved by emphasizing that some three million of their co-religionists reside in the U.S. and that the practice of Islam (or any other religion) is not hindered by official or unofficial Government policies. This approach could highlight American appreciation of diverse cultures and traditions.

A second major contribution would be a greater effort to show Soviet Muslims that the U.S. is aware of and sympathetic toward their culture, traditions, ethnic identity, and religion. In this area the importance of approaching Soviet Central Asians as Muslims and as individual ethnic groups was stressed. Thus, Soviet Muslims should not be treated as an undifferentiated mass, but care should be taken to show Uzbeks and Tadzhiks, for example, that the U.S. recognizes and is interested in their separate identities.

Finally, it was suggested that greater attention should be paid to significant Islamic historical, religious, and political figures, and that a special effort be made to acknowledge their contributions to Islamic and world culture on special anniversaries and important dates such as the 1000th anniversary of the birth of Avicenna, who made great contributions to the culture of the West as well as Central Asia. Concentration on the history and culture of the individual groups would also make a considerable impact.

The second policy realm concerned specific programs or USICA activities. Here it was suggested that the Agency had an especially great responsibility for increasing communication with Soviet Muslims through VOA, exhibits, exchanges, and written materials. The expansion of VOA language services to include Azeri and to augment Uzbek and Farsi was acknowledged and supported, and even greater extensions of air time and language coverage were urged. Critical distinctions even within VOA services, such as the use of Baku versus Tabriz Azeri and the VOA Division into which the Azeri service was placed (USSR division) were commented upon although no concrete recommendations were made.

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These questions are of critical importance in the essentially borderless context of Central Asia where cognate ethnic groups outside the Soviet Union hear and understand broadcasts to the USSR. Thus, the decision to broadcast in (e.g.) Farsi and Azeri is complicated by the question of whether or not the programs should be targeted to an audience inside the Soviet Union or placed in a more general context. The almost total lack of information about present and potential audiences adds to the difficulty. It was suggested that some impact might be had on Soviet Muslims by working with friendly or allied countries on the periphery of Soviet Central Asia (e.g., Turkey, Pakistan, Egypt) whose radio broadcasts are received and probably listened to in the region. An attempt might be made to place materials on these services aimed for Soviet Muslims.

It was strongly urged that, when the exhibits program resumes, strong attention be paid to the selection of sites in national minority areas. Priority should also be given to providing native language exhibit captions and backup materials, and to recruiting guides who speak the local language. While there was some discussion of the difficulties involved, especially in guide recruitment, it is probable that with adequate planning in the design phase of an exhibit, these priorities can be met.

Concern was expressed that the foreign affairs community does not systematically monitor Soviet Central Asian local language media. It is therefore not possible to determine to what extent events, particularly those in Iran and Afghanistan, are portrayed differently in these media than they are in Russian language broadcasts and publications. The difficulties involved in remedying this situation lie in the areas of acquiring materials and locating trained specialists. It is obvious that at the moment no single Government agency has the staff or capacity to undertake this analysis by itself.

In the longer run, USICA programs such as exhibits, exchanges, publications, and cultural activities should be more sharply targeted on Central Asia. These efforts will be hampered by the critical lack of individuals with expertise in the area languages and culture, a situation which can only be remedied by a major commitment to academic institutions which provide such training. One immediate step that was urged was for USICA to support the IREX preparatory fellowship program which would encourage young Soviet specialists to concentrate on Central Asia.

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It was felt that because of the lack of general expertise on this region and the dynamic changes taking place on both sides of the border, additional workshops and expanded meetings to continue the dialogue between policy-makers and programmers, on the one hand, and area specialists, on the other, would be an important contribution to ongoing discussions in the foreign affairs community.

Because most USICA programming to the Soviet Union has been Russian-centered, a sudden upsurge in attention to Soviet Muslim areas in the current context takes on larger political overtones than would have been the case had USICA previously been programming to the area. While USICA should not exaggerate its ability to influence events, the Agency need not be defensive about giving appropriate attention to the cultural and linguistic distinctions of the Soviet Muslim nationalities (which the Soviets themselves do). In all of these policy areas it was urged that the U.S. neither attempt to conceal expanded efforts nor overly emphasize the greater importance placed upon programming to the region. In the words of one expert, the U.S. should not "blow its horn," but approach the area honestly and openly.

It is important to keep in mind that the Soviet Union remains a highly centralized, Russian-dominated society and that the perceptions and attitudes of Soviet elites should be a prime concern of USICA. In this context, it is important to assess and understand Soviet elite attitudes toward Soviet Muslims and related phenomena such as the growth of Russian nationalism. This growth may be an antagonistic reaction to the fact that Russians are becoming a numerical minority, or it may be a search, parallel to the search being made by others, for that ethnic and national identity which has not been replaced or fulfilled by Soviet Communist ideology.

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